

Culture hero

A **culture hero** is a mythological hero specific to some group (cultural, ethnic, religious, etc.) who changes the world through invention or discovery. Although many culture heroes help with the creation of the world, most culture heroes are important because of their effect on the world after creation. A typical culture hero might be credited as the discoverer of fire, agriculture, songs, tradition, law, or religion, and is usually the most important legendary figure of a people, sometimes as the founder of its ruling dynasty.^[1]

Contents

Culture heroes in mythology

History of a culture hero

Creation of a culture hero

Characteristics of a culture hero

Disappearance of a culture hero

Examples

See also

References

Culture heroes in mythology

History of a culture hero

The term "culture hero" was first brought about by historian Kurt Breysig; however, he used the German word *heilbringer*, which translates to 'savior'. Over the years, "culture hero" has been interpreted in many ways. Older interpretations by Breysig, Paul Ehrenreich, and Wilhelm Schmidt thought that the journeys of culture heroes were ways in which humans could attempt to understand things in nature, such as the rising and setting of the sun, or the movement of the stars and constellations. Their interpretations eventually got rejected and replaced with newer interpretations by scholars such as Hermann Baumann, Adolf E. Jensen, Mircea Eliade, Otto Zerries, Raffaele Pettazzoni, and Harry Tegnaeus which evolved as a result of having more access to ethnological data, creating the present day and famously known version of the culture hero.^[1]

Creation of a culture hero

Culture heroes are able to perform unbelievable tasks in life because they are different from the normal human. It is often believed that the culture hero is not from this world. All of a culture hero's power originates from birth. Culture heroes are rarely born regularly. When their mothers get pregnant, it is not because of a man but instead is the result of the wind, or a drop of water. Once culture heroes are born, they are either very powerful babies or even come out of the womb as already full grown. The main point this makes is that the culture hero is not from this world.^[1]

Characteristics of a culture hero

A culture hero generally goes on an adventure (often called the hero's journey) that in turn does one of the following:

- Saves humankind from a dangerous monster
- Shapes the world (rivers, mountains, etc...)
- Creates distinction between humans and animals
- Makes economic life possible for humans (teaching the humans)
- Sets the origin of death

Culture heroes often have more than one form, such as having the ability to transform from human to some form of animal, such as a fish or bird. A culture hero has many good qualities about him/her but also bad ones, which is why they must go on their journeys. In some journeys the hero is known as a trickster. They act in their own selfish way and the benefits of their actions end up being shared with humans as a side effect.^[2]

Disappearance of a culture hero

Once culture heroes have finished their task, they usually end up disappearing. In many stories, the hero is transformed back to his origin. Other times the place of death will be marked with a stone, tree, or body of water. The end of a culture hero's life will lead to the creation of something else, such as a river, constellations, food, animals, and the moon and sun. Culture heroes are the etiological explanation for many humans about the things occurring in their daily lives.^[2]

Examples

In many Native American mythologies and beliefs, the coyote spirit stole fire from the gods (or stars or sun) and is more of a trickster than a culture hero. Natives from the Southeastern United States typically saw a rabbit trickster/culture hero, and Pacific Northwest native stories often feature a raven in this role: in some stories, Raven steals fire from his uncle Beaver and eventually gives it to humans. The Western African trickster spider Ananse is also common. In Norse mythology, Odin steals the mead of poetry from Jotunheim and is credited as the discoverer of the runes.^[3]

See also

- Folk hero
- Founding myth
- List of culture heroes

References

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3. Long, Jerome H. (2005). "Culture Heroes". In Lindsay Jones; et al. (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 3 (second ed.). Macmillan Reference USA: Thomas Gale.

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